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ABSTRACT

No ceremony or rite exists to usher the African American male youth into proper manhood. Such ceremonies, referred to as rites of passage, mark commonly agreed-upon standards, activities, tasks, and trials that each youth must master to achieve the community-sanctioned title "man." The clear articulation and subsequent implementation of such a process will have a measurable effect in reducing the effect of current destructive forces in American urban society to which the African American male child is exposed. The basis of these rites of passage is found in African heritage. In American society, schools do not fulfill the requirements of a true rite of passage. Development of an Africentric rite of passage should begin with an examination of the principles of education and socialization found in Africa. An example of such a process is the Simba Wachanga (Kiswahili for "young lions") program in Cleveland (Ohio). With the addition of a component for females, this program evolved into an Africentric rite of passage that was replicated successfully throughout Ohio. Rites of passage for African American youth must be Africentric and grounded in the black value system. The concept provides an opportunity to develop and nurture a much-needed generation of African American youth. (SLD)

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"FORWARD TO THE PAST"

AFRICENTRIC RITES OF PASSAGE

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Ohio Rites of Passage

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> The literature from African American culture and behavior, as well as findings from psychoneuroimmunology, confirm the importance of the way people controlling the way they think, feel and behave. It is also clear that the African-American anchored in his Africentrism has a well-nourished psychosocial stronghold against the by products of racism, including black-on-black murder.[1]

Today, African-Americans as a whole have less effective controls over the machinery of childrearing and the education/socialization of its youth than ever before. Any group which fails to consciously and systematically frame the parameters in which these processes occur elevates the vulnerability of their young, promotes discontinuity, and worse, sets the stage for potential group demise. The by-products of this loss are the first generation without long blood ties to the African-American church or to the ancestral south, and they are the first to be so profoundly integrated into the life and values and arms of European-America.

William Strickland notes in "Where Have All The Heroes Gone?",

> "Yet to their credit, many have not been taken in. Many do realize the man cannot be trusted, so their moral is 'take the money and run'. But this attitude is destructive to race equity, because it produces a kind of calculating personality which believes in neither the man nor in black people. Only self has meaning, only self is relevant. Community is simply another word

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[1]Charles Thomas, Pride And Purpose As Antidotes To Black Homicidal Violence, (The Journal Of The National Medical Association, November 2, 1987), Volume 74.

for market."[2]

The middle class perspective has its counterpart among African-American street youth, where a new predatory urban class has emerged. As such, they are indifferent to and about life, preys on the old, the innocent, and one another. The African-American male youth have no productive role in the American economy and left to this society, will never have one. Lacking historical consciousness and social conscience, they represent a great irony, for they are, in one sense, the new warriors--only they ravage the people instead of the people's enemies.

In America, manhood is closely tied to the acquisition of wealth; wealth is power--the power to control others. If such a need cannot be satisfied through formal institutions via job and status, youth will seek other alternatives to compensate for denial and exclusion. In many instances, when lifelines to masculinity are systematically severed, African-American males overcompensate in the sexual arena. Rape and violent acts of aggression afford a moment of power, and by extension, status.

Novelist Gloria Naylor in The Women Of Brewster Place, describes such a moment of power:

> "These young men always moved in a pack, or never without two or three. They needed the others continually near to verify their existence. When they stood with their black skin, ninth grade diplomas and fifty word vocabularies in front of the mirror that the world had erected and saw nothing, those other pairs of tight

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[2]Essence Magazine, (November, 1985), p. 72.

jeans, suede sneakers, and tinted sunglasses imaged nearby proved that they were alive--they move through the streets insuring that they could at least be heard, if not seen, by blasting their portable cassette players and talking loudly. They continually surnamed each other man and clutched at their crotches readying the equipment they deemed necessary to be summoned any moment...she has stepped into the thin strip of earth that they claimed as their own. Bound by the last building on Brewster and Brickwall, they reigned in that unlit alley linked dwarfed warrior-kings. Both with the appendages of power, circumcised by a guillotine, and baptized with the stream from a million non-reflective mirrors, these young wouldn't be called upon to fight a war in a far-off land, point a finger to move a nation, or stick a pole into the moon--and they knew it. They only had that three-hundred-foot alley to serve them as a stateroom, armored tank and executioner's chamber. So Lorraine found herself, on her knees, surrounded by the most dangerous species in existence--human males with an erection to validate in a world that was only six feet wide."[3]

The African-American male's lifelines to masculinity are systematically severed. Nobody ever officially tells him when he has attained manhood, and there is generally too little to signify

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[3]Gloria Naylor, The Women Of Brewster Place, (Penguin, N.Y.C., 1982).

or certify it concretely. There is no ceremony, or ritual even, as in ancient Africa or Bar Mitzvah, to usher the African-American male into proper manhood. Such a ceremony and ritual will be referred to as Rites-of-Passage. Simply stated, Rites of Passage are commonly agreed upon standards, activities, tasks and trials which each youth must master to begin the journey and achieve the community sanctioned title man.

I am of the firm belief that the clear articulation and subsequent implementation of such a process will have a measurable effect in terms of reducing, or at least minimizing, current destructive forces to which the African-American male child and, subsequently, man is exposed. This belief is rooted in the understanding that such a process will have its basis in black objective reality. Such will factor in the importance and implications of rearing youth in a hostile environment and, thereby, provide them with better armaments and tools with which to minimize the forces that would destroy them and at the same time allow them access to the fullness of humanity. One of the fundamental ways human groups ensure continuity and continuation of their culture over time, is to socialize the young in manners of feeling, thinking, believing, and behaving so that they become proficient bearers of the group's culture. The socialization process becomes a prescription for group survival. It incorporates all that has been, all that currently is, and mirrors the hope for the future.

When comparing African-American culture to African culture, one finds in some African cultures definite rituals through which males must pass in order to be recognized as men.

These activities prepare young people in matters of sexual life, marriage, procreation and family and community responsibilities and fulfill a great educational purpose. The occasion often marks the beginning of the acquisition of knowledge which is not otherwise accessible to

those who have not been initiated. It is a period of awakening to many things, a period of dawn for the young. They learn to endure hardships; they learn to live with one another; they learn to obey; they learn secrets and mysteries of man-woman relationships.

That part of our rich African inheritance that was characterized by traditions of personal mastery and locus of control through the ritualization of social relationships has been lost. But, in assessing our present predicament, it is only natural that we examine our African origins to determine what it is that we lost that should have been saved. Obviously, many worthy elements of our heritage have been lost, or stripped away, or simply allowed to wither. The nearest modern equivalent to ancient initiation rites is formal and institutionalized education. Both processes are compulsory. Both try to bend unruly energies of youth to constructive social purposes. Both attempt to teach obedience, discipline, and the basics of proper behavior. Both express and communicate the central value of the sponsoring culture. The differences between the old and new are as follows:

--The old rites were religious; the new rites are usually secular.

--The old rites ran by sun and seasonal time; the new rites operate by clock and calendar, (usually sedentary and behind closed doors).

--The old rites centered on concrete experiences; the new rites rely heavily on words, numbers, and abstractions.

--The old rites were dramatic, intense, forceful, and fast; the new rites are slow, strung out, and often vague about ultimate destination.

--The old rites engendered awe; the new rites commonly produce detachment and boredom.

--The old rites typically gave a sense of vital participation in the historical unfolding of the culture as a whole; the new rites are often created holding areas where youth are held in isolation from the larger cultural reality rather than allowed to experience it.

--The old rites resulted in an immediate and unmistakable status change; the new rites provide no such direct deliverance into adult roles and status.

--The old rites were over at a determined place and at a determined time, witnessed by the community as a whole; the new rites can go on indefinitely and be severed (dropping out and being pushed out), perhaps never resulting in general community recognition.

--The old rites were in the hands of caring and concerned adults who had the interests of youths at heart; the new rites are frequently monitored by uncaring employees whose purpose for being involved is related to his or her own financial condition and interest, (a shift in the locus of control from the family to the state and corporate America).

Given that schools do not satisfactorily fulfill the cognitive, physical, psychological/emotional, affective, and cultural requirements of a true Rite of Passage, it is

necessary for families and communities to provide a process for transition from boyhood to manhood/adulthood.

The development of a process for rites of passage should begin with a review of African educational and socialization systems. Rites of Passage does not exist per se in Africa and other parts of the world but is subsumed within the cultural socialization process of the family/community, (tribe, etc.). The process is ongoing from birth to death.

The ten basic principles of African education found continent-wide for educating and socializing children are as follows:

--Separate child from the community and routines of daily life. Separation had deep spiritual meaning--it prevents distraction.

--Observing nature. African schools were built on observing nature. Cycles of growth and development based on universal principles of life--maximum exposure to nature, so nature can become the teacher.

--Peership, age mates, a social process based on age. Education in Africa is a social process as opposed to the west educational emphasis on individualism. African education is a social process conducted in groups. Observations of children evidenced they learn in groups. All children are expected to master all requirements from beginning to end as a group--this is the African way. Not gifted, average and retarded groupings.

--Rejection of childhood, remember Paul, "When I became a man,

I put away childish things." A point of departure based on a ceremonial shift, so everybody knows it's time to quit playing and be serious.

--Listening to the elders; in African education the most significant part is conducted by the elders. Wisdom is more than knowledge. Young children need to be exposed to wisdom, and that doesn't mean degrees. Elders play a major role in the education and socialization of children in traditional African society.

--Purification rituals, African education is full of rituals. Symbolic purifications for feeling different, such as baptism. Things that are symbolized are internalized and made meaningful.

--Tests of character via demonstrations of courage, loyalty, commitment and persistence.

--Use of special language. New vocabulary, set of sounds and symbols. Use of a special name. Use of names that are symbolic of certain types characteristics. Symbols or names that have special meaning.

--Symbolic resurrection--upon completion of the process, you demonstrate or manifest what has happened to you by a ceremony that says I am now reborn into the community. The community stops its business and welcomes you back as part of the community.

Use and adaptation of the principles identified does not exclude children from a mastery of modern technology; or keep them from learning about other people in the world. However, what will happen through the use of these principles is casting the education of our children in a more humane light; it will also help the community to go beyond the minimum and linear requirements of mass training for employment.

Adults are not born but made; and a tree without roots cannot survive!

The development of centered and whole men and women will require a rediscovery and reactivation of some of the customs, traditions, rituals, and ceremony we once had but lost. Customs, traditions, rituals, and ceremony are as veins and arteries to the body or wiring of a radio or an electrical plant. Without connectors, there will be a breakdown in the continuity of flow, a shortage will occur somewhere in the system. Many of us have neglected and even shunned these processes...at our peril. At the very time when functioning males are too often missing from households, when too many children do not have a daily model in their homes, indeed, sometimes do not know exactly what their fathers do for a living, or, in fact, may not know their children except, at best, on a fractionalized basis, the benefits of custom, ceremony, faith, and ritual acculturation have been discarded and held in contempt for us as a people. Social scientists with a wide range of ideological and ethnic perspectives have concurred that

> ....There is no evidence that people living in a secular urbanized world have less need of ritualized expression for their transitions from one status to

another.[4]

We have been educated away from ourselves. Many blacks and whites, especially the educated tend to hold with disdain education and/or socialization prescriptions for blacks that in some respect differ from that provided whites. Blacks who have been inconvenienced and/or denied opportunity for development are naturally afraid of anything that sounds like discrimination or resegregation. They are anxious to have anything and everything that European-Americans have, even if it is harmful.

What has been lacking in the socialization of African-American youth in America, has been the presence of an orderly process of maturation to prepare them for adulthood. Institutions have failed to fill the void. Institutions are ineffective because of their own lack of preparation and commitment to respond to the needs of African-American youth. As a result of the vacuum, most African-American youth become indoctrinated by the street, peers and the electronic media; the over glamorization of popular culture; and the racist propaganda that underlie American society. It is little wonder that African-American youth particularly males have become confused, embittered, demoralized and walking time bombs.

If we are to promote the positive development of African American males, we must have an Africentric Rites of Passage model that expressively addresses itself to their exceptional needs.

Africentric Rites of Passage is a transformational process that functions as a prelude to a metamorphosis, to manhood, to adulthood, to wholeness. Manhood development is only one

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[4]Yehudi A. Cohen, "Ceremonies In The Second Stage Of Puberty", In Childhood To Adolescence: Legal Systems And Taboos, (Chicago, Aldine Publishing Company, 1964).

aspect of becoming whole. Wholeness reflects self knowledge, personal mastery and an Africentric locus of control. The Africentric locus of control places descendants of Africans in the center. It proceeds on the basis of the question, "is it in the best interest of African people?" Such Africentricity, questions our approach to every conceivable human enterprise. It questions the approach you make to reading, writing, running, keeping healthy, teaching, struggling, parenting, preaching and working. If you do not come from an Africentric locus of control base, then you are in serious ethical and cultural trouble.

In October, 1984, a Rites of Passage process entitled Simba Wachanga was implemented at the East End Neighborhood House in Cleveland, Ohio. Simba Wachanga is Kiswahili for "young lions". The program was predicated on children as the wealth of a nation and the reward of life; the process for male adolescents functions as a guidance system through which African-America speaks to its young males telling them:

Who they are!

Where they should be going!

What they need to do to get there!

What they must have when they arrive!

In 1986, the program became the Simba Wachanga Na Malaika Network. Malaika is Kiswahili for queen and was included as a female developmental component. It was determined males and females are severed halves who by themselves are incomplete. Wholeness involve the two coming together. The program has separate gender tracks that intersect for special activities and occasions. In 1990, the program became The Ohio Africentric Rites of Passage Collective and was replicated throughout the State of Ohio. Projects outside of Cleveland are in

Columbus, Lima, Dayton and Cincinnati.

The Ohio Africentric Rites of Passage Collective represents a group of individuals who subscribe to the belief that, "children are the reward of life", and that it is the responsibility of the family/community to provide leadership and direction for their journey to adulthood.

The foundation of the Collective is predicated on the Nguzo Saba or seven principles. Principles are important because without them, practice would be incorrect and possibilities would be limited. Principles are categories of commitment and priorities which define human possibilities and a value system. The premise of the Nguzo Saba is based on Maulana Karenga's Kawaida Theory which maintains, "that if the key crisis in black life is the cultural crisis, i.e., a crisis in views and values, then social organization or rather reorganization must start with a new value system".[5] The Nguzo Saba is the moral minimum value system African-Americans need in order to rescue and reconstruct their history and humanity, indeed their daily lives, in their own image and interests. The seven principles are unity, self determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. The goals of The Ohio Africentric Rites of Passage Collective are as follows:

--Legitimization of beingness as male and female.

--Provision of a family code.

--Being able to respond to both known and undefined situations.

--Elasticity of boundaries.

--Developing rules of conduct.

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[5]Maulana Karenga, Kawaida Theory, Kawaida Publications, Inglewood, California, 1980.

--Mediation of concrete conditions

Collective levels of proficiency relate to the following:

--Skills that must be developed.

--Skills that must be rendered.

--Things must be experienced.

--Behavior that must be modeled.

--Information that must be learned.

As related to The Ohio Africentric Rites Of Passage Collective, the following minimum standards have been established:

--Develop an understanding of the Nguzo Saba minimum value system;

--Develop an understanding of African and African American History and culture;

--Develop an understanding of the importance of physical well-being;

--Develop an understanding of spirituality;

--Develop an understanding of cooperative economics;

--Develop an understanding of the future and how to provide for oneself and family;

--Develop an understanding of the concept of leadership;

--Develop an understanding of the concept of community

services;

--Develop an understanding of government and politics;

--Develop an understanding and fluency of basic Spanish and/or Swahili;

--Develop an understanding of what is a man and woman.

In the process of taking control of the socialization/acculturation of our youth, two core issues are important. These issues have a profound effect on how you develop or define the vision for a Rites of Passage effort; and providing the framework for building curriculum that will translate your vision into reality. One is your need to decide on a philosophical basis for the curriculum and the other is the approach to learning that you intend to foster.

For any Rites of Passage program, the development of a curriculum must proceed from an historical reference point and the cultural aesthetic you apply, but it is also deeply influenced by the social political and spiritual perspectives you wish to emphasize. The positions you take on these matters constitute the philosophical basis for curriculum. What is your historical reference point, and where in time is it established? How will you treat the movement of our people, from the beginnings of human existence to the present? What is your relationship to Africa? These questions determine how information will be presented within the structure of your school. These approaches constitute the foundation upon which information in the curriculum in organized and presented, as well as how individual participants perceive themselves and their own history.

What is your cultural aesthetic? By whose cultural standards do you measure yourself and your accomplishments? For example, what is success? Does it mean that you are

successful if you are the first African-American to be recognized for doing what other Americans have done throughout history? Do you grasp the forefront of a movement and make a contribution that no one else has made? Must you be original in solving problems facing your own communities? Should you encourage participants to take the skills you have worked so hard to develop in them and apply them outside our community? Your cultural aesthetic will help you fix a reference point, but it also helps you decide what you mean by concepts such as human worth, beauty, appreciation for The Arts, and other things you value. How will the curriculum content reflect these issues of aesthetics? Wade Nobles has pointed out that the task of the family, parents, teachers and concerned adults is to prepare our children to live and be among White people without becoming White people.[6]

What is your social and political perspective on the proper relationships among and between groups in society and issues of empowerment? For example, how will the curriculum address specific issues like the succession movement of the area of Roxbury (Boston) from The United States in 1986 and apartheid in South Africa? Will the curriculum prepare students to interpret future issues from an African-American perspective? What is your spiritual perspective? What role will religion have in the curriculum and what values are to be stressed? Where will you place the focus of your curriculum on the continuum between a spiritual or a materialistic interpretation?

Why focus on Africa as a reference point for the treatment of history, culture, politics and spirituality in the curriculum? It is not to recreate Africa here in The United States. It is

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[6]Wade Nobles, The Black Family And Its Children: The Survival Of Humaness, (Unpublished Paper).

to internalize the concept of Africa as part of our perspective and to point out the contributions of Africa and Africans to our development. It is also done to recognize that cultural and academic excellence are of equal importance; youth cannot achieve academic excellence and yet know nothing about their culture. Furthermore, the social knowledge we learn from other people determines the priorities we establish in applying scientific knowledge. That is to say, if we are going to learn about computers in our curriculum, what will we as African-Americans do with the computers in our lives? It is important for Rites-of-Passage volunteer-instructors/guides to understand that youth interpret their experiences and their environment differently and use different forms of logic to arrive at their various points of view. The volunteers can be most effective when they are flexible, adapting their instruction to multiple learning styles, because not all learning occurs in a one-way movement from adult volunteer to participant.

There are two methods of instruction volunteers should use. One is the instructor-directed approach and the other is participant-directed approach. In the instructor-directed approach, most of the decisions about what will be discussed are made by the instructor. The focus also is on products of learning, which often leads to rote responses. Youth tend to give you what you asked for, but they have not internalized how to arrive at a particular point of view. They will recite pledges without knowing the meaning of the pledge. With this type of learning, instructors may feel that they have accomplished something when, in fact, they have not. The participant-directed approach focuses on discovery, allowing instructors to build learning experiences around students exploring for themselves. Here, the emphasis is on process or how information is learned. Participants are involved in field trips, interviews, bringing

people to the skill activity and so forth. Instructors may not see immediate results, but learning is taking place.

An understanding of culture and cognition is vital to the success of designing curriculum that matches the learning styles of African-American children. Janice Hale Benson[7], and Jawanza Kunjufu[8], identify learning styles and relevant curriculum for developing positive self-images and discipline in African-American children. Youth learn ninety percent of what they do, fifty percent of what they see, and only ten percent of what they hear. "Learning by doing" utilizing a circular learning approach rather than a linear approach is African in nature and approximates the learning styles of African-American youth. Life is a succession of stages or passages. We are not unlike the lobster. The lobster grows by developing and shedding a series of hard, protective shells. Each time it expands from within, the confining shell must be sloughed off. It is left exposed and vulnerable until, in time, a new covering grows to replace the old. With each passage from one stage of human growth to the next we, too, must shed a protective structure. We are left exposed, and vulnerable--but also yeasty and embryonic again, capable of stretching in ways we hadn't known before.

Everything that happens to us--birthdays, baptism, graduations, getting a job, losing a job, marriage, childbirth, divorce, death--affects us.

The experiences of existing adolescent rites societies and projects reflect three stages: Pre-passage; Passage; and The Passage Ceremony. Pre-passage involves fulfilling the specified

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[7]Janice Hale, Black Children: Their Roots, Culture And Learning Styles, (Brigham Young University Press, Provo, Utah, 1982).

[8]Jawanza Kunjufu, Developing Positive Self-Images And Discipline In Black Children, (African-American Images, Chicago, 1984).

age-group requirements. Passage is a period of demonstration and practical application of acquired competencies and skills. Passage is the bridging or transformation period. It is a prelude to a metamorphosis, to young manhood. When passage is final, a boy dies and a young man is born. The death of the child and his reincarnation as a man is the final bridge that must be crossed to enter adulthood as a young man. The distinction or honor of becoming an initiate or wearing the regalia of an initiate must be earned and sanctioned through The Passage Ceremony.

The length of time of Rites-of-Passage societies and programs vary from a lifetime to a minimum of one year. The Cleveland Rites of Passage projects pre-passage for fulfilling the minimum standards is seven months and five months for The Passage period. The Passage period requires demonstration in the following achievement areas (a composite of the minimum standards or basic skill areas--history, culture and life skills):

--Communication and organizational skills

Maintaining a written log/scrapbook

Autobiography

Biography (Male and Female)

Speeches

--Solitude and ordeal with self and nature

Camping, fast, etc.

--Retrieval and organization of information

Family Tree, interviews of elders

--Decision-making and Problem-solving

Fund raising, career exploration/planning

--Special life skills

Meal preparation for group, garden, health project,

arts and craft project, written examination (Nguza Saba,

Kwanzaa symbols, history, etc.), maintaining good grades

and positive attitude in school, family and community.

Rites of Passage ceremonies reflect the following general format:

Welcoming

Libation (Honoring the ancestors)

Processional

Audience participation (call and response, litany of the people)

Testimony

Challenge by relatives and friends

Recognition by significant others

Music

Prepared speech by initiate

Feast

Passage ceremony symbols and artifacts include but are not limited to the following:

Seven candles in holder

(three red, one black, three green)

Unity cup filled with water for libation

Bowl with earth

Straw mat

Nation flag (red, black, green)

Cornstalk (to be burned, symbolizing death of the boy)

Medallion (engraved with continent of Africa, outline of U.S.A.

inside Africa, color scheme of red, black, green)

Banner (incorporating Seven Principles)

In conclusion, Rites-of-Passage, be it family, church, school, Masonic, Greek, or professional organization based, must be Africentric and grounded in the Black value system. Thorough understanding and operationalization of such values and process is crucial. Rites-of-Passage is something "old" and of African tradition that must be re-institutionalized. The Rites-of-Passage concept provides an opportunity to develop and nurture a much needed generation of African-American youth as future providers, mates, and protectors.

The road ahead will not be easy; the greatest challenge is identifying, creating, and developing organizations and volunteers to make commitments and function as sponsors and nurturers.

In his poem "To Smile on Autumn", Photojournalist Gordon Parks recalls his father's advice on life. If a man can reach the latter days of life with his soul intact, he has mastered life. For Black men who survive into their sixties and beyond, reaching the spiritual heights Parks speaks of is a sweet finale. We as men and women, hopefully, can approach this finale having left our children a legacy. "I want all my children and your children to be proud of me. I want them to say, I provided them, not only with material things, but with care. I want them to say my parents and particularly my father gave me a vision of myself, and a foundation to

build on."

The time has come for men in the African-American community to stand up and be counted. The only thing we have to lose is our children.